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SUBJECT: DRIED-UP RIVER SYSTEM THREATENS SOUTH AUSTRALIAN  
WETLANDS

11. (SBU) Summary: A report presented to the Murray-Darling Ministerial Committee, which was leaked to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on June 18, says that the critically-stressed river system (the largest in Australia) has only months to go before salinity and acidification of the lower reaches alters, perhaps permanently, some of Australia's most significant wetlands. The report was commissioned by the Committee following concerns raised by South Australia (SA) Minister for Water Security Karlene Maywald in March, and may have been leaked to put pressure on the Committee to act after they put off consideration of the report until November. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Econoff met June 18 with South Australia (SA) Department of Water and Natural Resources officials in Adelaide. In casual conversation, the report came up. According to Paul Harvey, Program Leader for the Murray Darling Initiative, the report had been the result of SA Water Minister Maywald's March request to the inter-state Murray-Darling Ministerial Committee (MMDC) to take action to address critically low levels of water flowing into the Coorong system of lagoons and wetlands and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert at the mouth of the Murray River. With no flows into the sea in over three years, Harvey said, salinity and acidification of soils is a significant threat. The Committee had asked for a threat assessment by SA scientists, which was presented in May. This report says that areas of the lower Murray-Darling basin have only months left without major environmental flows before suffering irreversible damage - i.e., before the problem would be considered by the MMDC at its next meeting in November. This reportedly infuriated researchers who worked on the report and may have been behind the leak. University of Adelaide professor David Patton argued that a discussion in November of this question will not be about costs of adding environmental flows but about physical engineering to "remediate" the damage done.

13. (SBU) According to Harvey, the scale of the drought and over-allocation of scarce water in the river system were "beyond anything we had planned for." In the last 50 years, the river flows from New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria into SA in the Murray-Darling have never dipped below 1800 gigaliters. This year, flows will likely end up no more than 1050 gigaliters. Murray-Darling flows are so low that irrigators are now paying more than A\$1200 per megaliter, which makes almost any crop uneconomical. This amount also basically stops river flows, which has led to a return of the salinity and acidification problems that first arose in the 1950s and were the initial reason for inter-state environmental cooperation in the basin. Harvey said that there had been no flow from the river into the sea in three years. As a result, Lake Albert is now below sea level, and SA is spending A\$6 million a year to pump water from Lake

Alexandrina to Lake Albert to try and prevent a significant increase in salinity. Two of the wetlands of the Coorong are also identified as protected internationally under the RAMSAR wetlands convention, but to date the Federal Government has declined to use its foreign affairs powers under environmental laws to force NSW and Victoria to take away from water users in their states and put it back into the system.

14. (SBU) Responding to the storm of criticism over the decision to put off consideration of the crisis until November, Federal Minister for Water Penny Wong, said QNovember, Federal Minister for Water Penny Wong, said June 18 she was waiting for "urgent advice" from Federal Departments about possible actions. A request to contacts at the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts for further details went unanswered.

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